

Democrats Assail New Medicare Drug Law

By ELIZABETH WOLFE - Associated Press Writer

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WASHINGTON (AP) - Sounding a familiar Democratic theme, Rep. Jan **Schakowsky** on Saturday criticized the Republican-driven Medicare law as too flawed to fix and said new legislation should be crafted.

Delivering the Democrats' weekly radio address, the Illinois congressswoman said the new prescription drug law, narrowly approved last year by Congress and signed by President Bush, has resulted in higher out-of-pocket costs for the government-run health care program's 41 million beneficiaries.

"Unfortunately, the law is so flawed that there is no hope of fixing it," **Schakowsky** said. "For the sake of our seniors and for people with disabilities, we must scrap this bill entirely and start fresh."

The Medicare law has been wrapped in controversy since its passage, drawing critics from the outset and diminishing what the administration hoped would be an election-year boon for the GOP.

The law's first widely available tangible benefit, the Medicare-approved discount drug card program, has gotten off to a slow, confusing start. For poor older and disabled Americans who have no drug insurance, the cards are free; the government provides \$600 a year to defray the costs of prescription medications.

"The prescription drug cards that are the first step of this new plan have not provided the savings that were promised," **Schakowsky** said.

Some Democrats have proposed major revisions, including lifting a ban that prevents the federal government from negotiating Medicare drug prices with pharmaceutical companies, as the Veterans Administration does. Bush has promised to veto any changes to the new law.